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RESEARCH STUDY

BUREAU OF INTELLIGENCE AND RESEARCH

February 13, 1975

THE CHINESE LEADERSHIP AFTER THE NATIONAL PEOPLE'S CONGRESS

Summary

Many aspects of the National People's Congress (NPC) can be satisfactorily explained only if it is assumed that the important contending forces in the Chinese leadership remain in a situation far closer to deadlock than to a breakthrough "triumph of the moderates": This assumption is supported by

- the Congress's shortness, secrecy, and lack of subsequent fanfare;
- the retention in high position of the aged and ailing Chou En-lai and Yeh Chien-ying, notwithstanding widespread pre-NPC speculation that both were slated for inactive Party-elder status;
- the pairing of Teng Hsiao-p'ing and Chang Ch'un-ch'iao and their simultaneous elevation to top operating positions in Party, government, and the military: the two men appear to be antagonists in an inherently unstable duumvirate which straddles rather than resolves the radical-moderate cleavage;
- the absence of Mao, suggesting dissatisfaction with a July 1974 shift of forces within the leadership which has resulted in a prolongation of the uneasy leadership coalition, in a form which gives the Chouists a pronounced edge at the relatively unimportant ministry level but a much narrower and less assured edge at the top governmental and Party levels where it really counts;

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--the convoluted new military command structure, which in furthering Mao's longstanding aim of diminishing military influence at the center leaves open serious questions as to who actually will run the military and how effectively.

Two conclusions emerge:

--The "moderate tone" of the NPC initially tended to give an exaggerated impression of "moderate" preponderance within the leadership; it would be a mistake to overestimate this preponderance or to count confidently on its extended duration.

--Chang Ch'un-ch'iao becomes a key figure to watch. We are more struck by his "leftist" associations, other analysts by what they see as his movement toward the center of the PRC political spectrum. Yet there is uncertainty over where he currently stands on particular policies--even domestic policies, let alone foreign policies.

Prepared by D. W. Keyser
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The Mao Riddle

Three possible explanations have been advanced for Chairman Mao's unprecedented absence from the National People's Congress: illness, voluntary semi-retirement, and personal pique. Initial clandestine reporting indicates that internal Party briefings are lamely advancing the semi-retirement thesis while suggesting that Mao participated in and personally cleared all major personnel and policy decisions. The official line notwithstanding, however, both the illness and voluntary semi-retirement theories seem inconsistent with Mao's reception of a stream of foreign visitors.

Mao's Health. The evidence pertinent to Mao's physical and mental state is mixed. A significant sample of Mao's foreign visitors has reported that he is physically well for his years, mentally alert, and even capable of spontaneous wit.

But there is also ample testimony from foreign sources that Mao is failing: physically frail, seemingly disoriented, and rambling in conversation. Philippine First Lady Marcos, following their September 27 meeting, privately offered a graphic portrayal of a Mao far into his decline--attended by nurses, drooling, and reeking of medicinal balm and "decaying gums."

A Zairian participant in President Mobutu's mid-December meeting with Mao relayed a still more ominous observation: Mao merely parroted the cues flashed by a teleprompter on the wall immediately before him. If true (and the story cannot be discounted though it seems odd that no other visitors have noted the teleprompter), it suggests that Mao is vulnerable to manipulation by others. Authoress Han Su-yin, following a visit to China last

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autumn, confided that unnamed high-level interlocutors believed that Mao was being used, sometimes for contradictory ends, by those enjoying direct access to him.

Mao and the Anti-Confucius Campaign. It is possible that a declining Mao, upset by the partial rejection of his personal vision of the succession, chose to demonstrate his disenchantment by a symbolic withdrawal from Peking in July 1974.

In early June the campaign to criticize Lin and Confucius reached fever pitch as Central Directive #18--attributed to Mao personally--sanctioned nationwide poster attacks on ranking officials. One month later Central Directive #21--merely "read by Chairman Mao"--in effect repudiated the poster attacks. Citing damage to the national economy and misunderstanding of the exhortation to "go against the tide," the second document stifled the campaign. Two weeks later Mao abruptly departed the capital.

The official line that the campaign had been "initiated and led" in February 1974 by Mao himself should be taken seriously; Mao, no doubt supported by his leftist wife and her allies, had intended a last hurrah to purify Chinese officialdom once again before his retirement. His specific objectives are obscure, but they probably included:

- providing an opportunity to younger cadres, notably including Party Vice Chairman Wang Hung-wen, to prove their mettle in a major political campaign;
- evolution through the course of the campaign of a consensus on the succession leadership, perhaps involving a purge of selected military or other leaders judged recalcitrant.

Abortion of the anti-Lin anti-Confucius campaign anticipated the failure of these objectives, raised the spectre of political retrogression after Mao's death, and intimated that the Politburo might be at the point of decision to shelve Mao gracefully--as had been attempted in the early sixties--before he was prepared to bow out. These

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considerations taken together constituted a powerful stimulus, and Mao's reaction--withdrawal--was precisely the same as his response a decade earlier.

Mao-Chou Friction. Mao's wrath doubtless was directed in part at Premier Chou. Throughout 1974 it was widely rumored that Mao was at odds with Chou on such matters as the handling of the campaign and the composition of the NPC delegate list. Whatever the truth of such charges, they suggest popular awareness of friction in the Mao-Chou relationship. And immediately following Mao's departure a spate of historical articles incorporated a new twist on a familiar story; the Chou stand-in was charged allegorically with permitting a restorationist coup through irresolution, self-interest, and conciliation.

Mao's Absence. If Mao really has declined to the point that he parrots cues from a teleprompter, his departure may be seen by the leadership in Peking as the knee-jerk response of a senile old man. So long as Mao remains outside the capital, however, there must be a presumption that he has deliberately disassociated himself from events there. And whatever Mao's mental state and his precise motivation, that fact alone must be profoundly unsettling to the day-to-day leaders in Peking, who would recognize that Mao, however enfeebled, remains the embodiment of regime legitimacy and as such is capable of threatening their own positions.

Hence the ambiguity surrounding Mao's absence is understandable. From Mao's standpoint, advertisement of the breach might force the issue prematurely, reduce his options, and shatter irrevocably the fragile unity of a fractionalized leadership. And Mao's opponents for their part would logically strive to conciliate Mao where possible. So months ago they made every effort to consult--or give the appearance of consulting--Mao on major decisions by instituting a daily shuttle flight between the capital and his base in central China.

The July 1974 Political Equilibrium

In short, Mao's absence from the NPC is understandable as an expression of dissatisfaction with the new political equilibrium established against his wishes in July 1974. But we do not agree with the speculation that the NPC

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signified a mortal blow to the left. What we see instead is that last July, for reasons unknown to us, a shift of forces took place within the top Chinese leadership which, while significant, was far from a "triumph of the moderates." To the contrary, it resulted in a further prolongation of the uneasy leadership coalition, in a form which did give the Chouists an edge--a pronounced edge at the ministry level of government, a much less assured edge at the top governmental and Party level--but which at the same time includes major participation by the "radicals."

In our view, many aspects of the NPC cannot be explained satisfactorily unless it is assumed that the important adversary forces in the Chinese leadership remain in a situation which comes far closer to deadlock than to breakthrough victory for a single side. Mao's absence is one such sign. Others are the brevity and secrecy of the NPC, and the oddly muted response to the NPC: official Party organs, contrary to custom, have not printed authoritative editorials or commentaries on the event; and provincial media have only perfunctorily acclaimed the "victory" and lauded the new constitutional provisions. Perhaps most striking of all are the retention in high position of the aged and ailing Chou En-lai and Yeh Chien-ying and the paired elevation to high Party, government, and military position of the antagonists Teng Hsiao-p'ing and Chang Ch'un-ch'iao.

The Retention of the Aged: A Holding Pattern Under Political Moderates

The reappointment of Chou as Premier and the appointment of 76-year-old Marshal Yeh, his close political collaborator, to be Defense Minister took place in the face of general speculation that both were slated for inactive Party-elder status.

--This suggests affirmation of Premier Chou's leadership and strengthening of his hand for the moment.

--But it also implies a postponement of hard decisions on political succession and an inability to designate successors equally acceptable to all leadership factions.

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Chou's controlling hand was readily discernible in the moderate tenor of the NPC proceedings.

--The new state Constitution makes a bow to the left by guaranteeing mass rights and retaining revolutionary committees, but its credo is "necessary flexibility."

--Chou's "Report on the Work of the Government" implied an expectation of stability and order by its focus on long-range economic planning.

But we would caution against any confident conclusion as to the longevity of this moderate tone. Basic divisions and tensions persist within the leadership. And it is well to recall that the Cultural Revolution was launched without advance warning, close on the heels of a 1964 Mao directive calling for 10-year economic plans.

The Rise of Teng Hsiao-p'ing and Chang Ch'un-ch'iao

With Chairman Mao, Premier Chou, and Defense Minister Yeh all in dubious health and probably withdrawing from the political arena, Teng Hsiao-p'ing and Chang Ch'un-ch'iao have become the key leadership figures by virtue of their acquisition of interlocking responsibilities in Party, state, and military affairs.

--Teng is concurrently Party Vice Chairman, Politburo Standing Committee member, ranking Vice Premier of the State Council under Chou, and Army Chief of Staff.

--Chang is a Politburo Standing Committee member, First Party Secretary of Shanghai, Vice Premier of the State Council, the presumed de facto Secretary General of the Party apparatus, and the director of the Army's General Political Department.

Teng the Pragmatist. The impression persists that the essential Teng is the one who declared (to the fury of 100%-pure leftists) that it is not the cat's color but his skill at catching mice that counts: Purged during the early stages of the Cultural Revolution--while Chang was centrally involved with Mao's radical supporters who were conducting the purge--on the ground that he was in partnership

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with Liu Shao-ch'i in cutting out Mao and leading China down the primrose path to revisionism, Teng returned to political grace in April 1973 and acquired Politburo standing in January 1974.

Mao reportedly accepted Teng's abject 30,000-character self-criticism, pronounced Teng "personally loyal" to him despite past political mistakes, and observed that he would make a "good chief of staff." But according to the most complete account of Mao's December 1973 address to the Politburo concerning Teng's promotion, Mao had mixed emotions, intimating that Teng might seek revenge against his persecutors. So it is unclear whether Mao himself originated the idea of returning Teng from disgrace or whether he was persuaded by a coalition of Chouist bureaucrats and regional military commanders, all of whom had past ties with Teng and presumably retained confidence in his political acumen and flexibility.

Given his background, Teng's swift return to the highest echelons of Party, government, and military has an air of artificiality. With his own self-criticism as testimony to earlier political sins, Teng is peculiarly vulnerable to attack from political opponents, from the left most of all. Much of the allegorical vitriol of the anti-Confucius literature seemed directed at Teng.

Chang Ch'un-ch'iao: How Leftist?

In spite of the fact that it is clearly an oversimplification to categorize in rigidly either-or terms, an analytical estimate of whether Chang Ch'un-ch'iao is a committed leftist or a leftist who has been co-opted by the moderates is central to any assessment of the ideological complexion of the post-NPC leadership.

Those who see Chang as a co-opted leftist argue that he is essentially a pragmatic, tough administrator whose Cultural Revolution activities were dictated by the necessity to preserve his power position in Shanghai during a period of revolutionary fervor. When the prevailing political mood turned moderate, it is asserted, Chang adjusted his philosophy, turned toward the center, and withdrew from his erstwhile allies.

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--The primary evidence for this view is a flurry of reports two years ago that Premier Chou particularly esteemed Chang and was grooming him as his own successor. An arguable deduction is that Chou, perceiving the pragmatic core beneath the leftist exterior, sought to co-opt Chang for his centrist coalition.

--Further possible evidence of Chang's co-option, so the argument goes, is his apparent lack of participation in the campaign to criticize Lin and Confucius: while Chiang Ch'ing and Wang Hung-wen seemed engaged almost frenetically in the campaign, seeking issues, delivering idance, launching attacks, and mediating between con fending factions, Chang remained a shadowy figure whose name never entered clandestine reporting. His association with the left, recently if at all, was well concealed.

If one accepts this line of reasoning, Chang's rise at the NPC suggests that the left is impotent, in disarray, and isolated within the Politburo, lacking a single representative at the highest echelons of the government or the military. But the NPC results make more sense if we assume Chang's continuing identification with the Maoist left. No equally plausible way can be found to account for the creation of an operating Teng-Chang duumvirate at the top of the three PRC hierarchies: Party, government, and military.

One small indication of Chang's predilections, contained in his otherwise rather straightforward presentation to the NPC of the new draft Constitution, was an ominous observation that "in some enterprises...leadership is not in the hands of Marxists and the masses of workers," an echo of a recent speech by Wang Hung-wen, who warned that "the influence of the revisionist line is still deep on the industrial front...some enterprises are in our hands only in appearance."

A reading of Chang's recent career does not permit the conclusion that he has shed his leftist ideas and allies. Prior to Chou's rumored effort to co-opt him, Chang's leftist identity was firm. He provided a haven for Chiang Ch'ing where she could popularize her revolutionary operas in the face of opposition from Peking-based moderates; he launched radical policies in his

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Shanghai bailiwick, making it the national model of leftism; he played a prominent role on the central Cultural Revolution Group which set policy and determined targets for purge; and he owes his prominence in good part to the personal sponsorship of Chairman Mao, with whom he can therefore be presumed to share an ideological affinity. Moreover, a wealth of recent clandestine reporting makes plain that Chang remains firmly identified in the popular mind with leading radicals Chiang Ch'ing, Yao Wen-yuan, and Wang Hung-wen.

We are inclined to accept the truth of Chou's reported sponsorship of Chang but to reject the supposition that it signified Chang's partial repudiation of his leftist identity. The politically astute Chou may have calculated that:

- the left would accept Chang's assumption of governmental duties as a recognition of its political clout and an opportunity to increase its input into decisionmaking;
- Chang's leftist views would hopefully evolve to a more centrist orientation as he became engaged in a milieu which demands flexibility;
- Chang's personal political ambitions coupled with his moderated outlook might in time wean him from his radical colleagues and thereby dilute the unity and political effectiveness of Chou's leftist adversaries.

The 1974 campaign to criticize Lin and Confucius shattered Chou's attempt to construct a new coalition. Instead, it reinforced the political polarization along left-moderate lines. Clandestine reporting as well as public appeals to refrain from "settling old scores" make plain that residual Cultural Revolution animosities simmer just beneath the surface and that factional and mentor-protégé relationships from that period are unchanged. Thus there is every reason to assume that Chang remained associated with the left, however invisibly, during the campaign and that there exist personal tension and ideological differences between Teng and Chang.

Wang Hung-wen and the "Eclipse" of the Left

Chang Ch'un-ch'iao's move into ranking state and military positions parallels his former protégé Wang Hung-wen's

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own unexpected vault into Party succession plans at the 10th Party Congress.

Despite occasional clandestine reporting that Mao himself envisioned governmental positions for Wang, Chiang Ch'ing, and Yao Wen-yuan, there is no reason to believe that any of the trio actively sought or secretly coveted a state slot.

One can theorize that a vice premiership for Wang would have broadened his experience and made him more credible as a successor. But he remains the ranking Party Vice Chairman after Chou, the person institutionally slated for Party Chairmanship after the demise of Mao and Chou, and as such the future commander-in-chief of China's armed forces according to a new constitutional provision. Additionally, appointment of Wang as Vice Premier would have entailed undesirable pecking-order complexities. As Vice Premier, Wang would have been listed ahead of Teng Hsiao-p'ing (since Party status is the guide), leaving the misimpression that he, not Teng or Chang, was slated to succeed Chou.

Chiang Ch'ing's influence and stature are independent of any formal position; her appointment as minister of culture or education, far from enhancing her standing, would have been interpreted as a slight, calculated to put her on equal standing with political nonentities. In any event, she scored an unqualified victory in her private campaign to oust her opponents from authority over culture. The State Council Cultural Group, headed by Peking boss Wu Te and staffed by veteran bureaucrats, had been attacked by implication for its role in permitting performance of an anti-Chiang Ch'ing opera last January. In abolishing the various offices under the State Council, the NPC apparently ousted Wu Te and his moderate associates from any further role in culture while turning over the Culture Ministry to Yu Hui-yung, an opera composer and close associate of Chiang.

Yao Wen-yuan, Chiang's protégé and Chang's second Party secretary in Shanghai, is generally considered the ranking Party ideologue/polemicist. As such, he is probably involved with editing of the Party organs Red Flag and

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People's Daily. These functions do not fit readily into the governmental apparatus, and his influence at the heart of the ideology-moulding and line-dissemination structure is far more potent than even a vice premiership.

New Controls Over the Military

The 4th NPC ratified the diminution of military influence in civilian affairs--a major goal of the year-long campaign to criticize Lin and Confucius and a central preoccupation of Mao Tse-tung since Lin Piao's aborted coup.

--Party Vice Chairman, Politburo Standing Committee member, and Shenyang Military Region Commander Li Te-sheng apparently surrendered his Party positions to Teng Hsiao-ping for reasons still obscure but associated with the drive against Lin's alleged supporters in the military. As a consequence, Defense Minister Yeh and Politburo member and Vice Premier Ch'en Hsi-lien presumably are the only high-level spokesmen for the professional military in Peking.

--Civilians Teng and Chang were assigned watchdog roles (chief of staff and top political commissar respectively) over the military, an unprecedented assertion of civilian Party supremacy.

But the premium placed by the central leadership on checks and balances in military affairs has resulted in an unfathomable military command structure. Party Vice Chairman and Defense Minister Yeh, a career military man assumed to share Chou's centrist viewpoint, outranks Teng and Chang in the Defense Ministry hierarchy, but is nominally subordinate to them and to Peking Military Region Commander Ch'en Hsi-lien in the governmental structure. It also remains to be seen how effectively the civilians assert their authority; preoccupied with their other portfolios, Teng and Chang may be forced to relinquish day-to-day responsibility in the military sphere to professional military subordinates.

The New Government Apparatus

The new state Constitution adopted at the 4th NPC formalizes the subordination of State to Party for the first

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time in PRC history:

"the NPC is the highest organ of State power under the leadership of the Communist Party of China... the Communist Party of China is the core of leadership of the whole Chinese people."

The 4th NPC was replete with symbolic affirmation of this; even Premier Chou's report on government work "on behalf of the State Council" was delivered "in accordance with the decision of" the Party Central Committee. We consider that the formal subordination of the moderate-dominated government apparatus to the Party is a concession to the left, which is better represented within the Party.

Ministerial Appointments. In accord with its constitutional responsibility, the 4th NPC appointed, "on the proposal of" the Party Central Committee, the Premier, 12 vice premiers, and 29 ministers of the State Council. The ministerial appointments by any yardstick gave short shrift to the young and the left. Although it is not altogether surprising that veteran bureaucrats and technocrats dominate government ministries which demand managerial and functional expertise, the virtual clean sweep by old-line cadres is a symbolic rebuff to those who inveighed against Confucius, retrogression, and indiscriminate restoration to prominence of Cultural Revolution victims.

But symbolism aside, the ministers as a group are not a potent factor. They are policy implementers, not formulators. The Party Politburo formulates policy, and only two of the 29 ministers hold seats on that body.

The Vice Premiers. The key figures in the government apparatus are, rather, Premier Chou's 12 vice premiers. At this juncture it is uncertain how they will function with respect to Chou above and the ministries below, but it seems likely that as individuals they will exercise authority over one or more ministries and as a group they will operate as a collegial supercabinet for governmental decisionmaking.

Consequently, it is more instructive to analyze the composition of the vice premiers' group than that of their ministerial subordinates for clues to the current central leadership mix and the state of planning for political succession.

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The 4th NPC transformed the vice premiers from an intimate band of aged moderates (Teng and Li Hsien-nien plus three inactive colleagues) into an expanded group of leaders more broadly representative of all Party elements. Eight of the 12 vice premiers hold concurrent Politburo rank, further reinforcing Party supremacy. The vice premiers now are split evenly among identifiable Chouist bureaucrats and relative newcomers--clearly non-Chouists and presumably leftists--from the Cultural Revolution and later. In this sense the vice premiers represent a bow to the succession principle of uniting the old, the middle-aged and the young, and their coloration is more leftist than before.

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